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ABSTRACT

West Georgia College, a public, 4-year institution in the University System of Georgia, conducted an assessment of its institutional research function. The assessment design consisted of two distinct elements: an internal program assessment, and an assessment of institutional research as perceived by campus constituents. The assessment was undertaken as part of the activities surrounding the entire institution's review and reaffirmation of accreditation from the Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The assessment design for institutional research functions was developed in compliance with SACS accreditation criteria as well as the institution's goal of determining how effective the office was in carrying out its mission. The office developed a survey asking for evaluation on external reporting, faculty studies, student studies, academic operations, institutional studies, institutional effectiveness, and planning and coordination support. Results indicated that for the most part institutional research studies were reaching the right people with the right information at the right time. For the internal program review, the office established a set of goals and objectives to guide the effort. The office developed its own four-part model and established and defined program outcomes and expected results. (Contains 19 references.) (JB)

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The Assessment of The Institutional Research Function

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ABSTRACT

Discussions of assessment in higher education are commonplace. However, dialogue concerning the assessment of the institutional research office and function has been scarce. This paper examines the planning and methodology of the assessment of the institutional research function at West Georgia College, a public 4-year institution, part of the University System of Georgia. The assessment design consists of two distinct elements; an internal program assessment, and an assessment of institutional research as perceived by campus constituents. Recommendations on the design, coordination, and dissemination of assessment findings are addressed.

for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Thirty-Fourth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at The New Orleans Marriott, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 29, 1994 - June 1, 1994. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Editor
Forum Publications

Introduction

Assessment is one mean to the end of improving the performance of individuals and institutions. It facilitates progress toward goals and objectives, and is vital for determining both efficiency and effectiveness. Institutional assessment is a complex, large scale, and in many ways, very subjective venture. It has a long history and is accompanied by an extensive literature. Assessment of the institutional research function and office is a more complex and ambiguous endeavor than the evaluation of other, more objective functions, such as academic programs or personnel. However, much more is known about assessment theories and methods than is usually applied; the professional diagnosis and prescription is often past over for the "quick fix". One of the major assessment related problems facing practitioners today is the fact that little, if any, of the current assessment literature is practical and 'user friendly'. The literature is much too mechanical and unrealistic. Even the jargon and argot associated with assessment makes acceptance and use highly doubtful. Like most other institutional research offices in our state, we have only two professional staff and simply cannot temporarily discontinue or suspend our support function in order to spend a great deal of time on assessment.

In order for assessment activities to be more worthwhile they must be pragmatic. Successful assessment is predicated on achieving a balance between the theoretical and the practical. In our assessment effort at West Georgia College, we strived to integrate assessment methodologies and prescriptions, without completely abandoning the sterile approach of theory, or the often volatile, humanistic approach.

Because decisions affecting institutional quality must be made daily, a meticulous employment of institutionally-specific assessment and evaluation measures will improve decision-making and institutional effectiveness. As the public, state, and federal government increase their demands for accountability in postsecondary education, we must begin to conduct more meaningful assessments and evaluations as part of our on-going decision-making activity.

If assessment is to be more than merely an academic exercise, it should begin with our making some basic assumptions about evaluation and about what will be assessed. Miller (1985) identified several broad premises on the process of assessment, which we adopted: (1) institutional evaluation and assessment will be an increasing part of higher education through the rest of the century; (2) assessment is already being done by someone, somehow; if public postsecondary institutions do not take it upon themselves to conduct vigorous periodic evaluation, likely it will be done for them; (3) the overall purpose of institutional assessment activity should be the improvement of the academic enterprise; (4) assessment can be done objectively and perceptively; (5) assessment quality <u>can</u> be defined; and (6) institutional quality is a composite of inter-dependent elements.

Defining Assessment

For our purposes, assessment is defined as the systematic basis for making inferences about the effectiveness of the institutional research function and office in providing data and information in support of institutional planning, policy formulation, and decision-making. Assessment processes include discussion of what should be assessed and how information will be used (Erwin, 1991; Marchese, 1987). Assessment activities should be tied directly to the institutional research purpose statement which should follow directly from the institutional mission statement (Erwin, 1991).

Successful assessment programs are ultimately a product of strong upper-level administrative support, flexibility in the design of assessment goals and methods, initial emphasis on institutional improvement rather than accountability, and commitment of human and fiscal resources to support assessment activities. It is imperative that we clearly communicate the purpose of assessment and how assessment results will be used. Building commitment from institutional constituents is a principal element in a successful assessment endeavor. The institutional research office must be given ample time and opportunity to establish goals, objectives, and evaluation methods in order to ensure meaningful assessment. The assessment process must be viewed as open and must at all times encourage wide-scale participation. If followed, these steps will minimize resistance to the assessment plan.

The Purpose of Assessing the Institutional Research Function and Office

An ongoing cycle of assessment of the institutional research office and function can help validate institutional effectiveness. When undertaking the assessment of the institutional research function and office, be especially careful not to confuse assessment and planning. Assessment should identify the degree to which institutional research activities exist "campuswide" and seek to improve the effectiveness of those activities.

The institutional research ***function*** is the activity of research conducted within an institution of higher education to provide information in support of institutional planning, policy formulation and decision making. Institutional research activities conducted campuswide can occur within units, schools, departments, and even committees. Such activities are conducted formally and informally, with specific objectives as well as simple 'fact finding' in mind.

The institutional research ***office*** is the organizational entity in which institutional research activities are the most highly centralized and concentrated. The responsibilities of an institutional research ***office*** frequently include carefully planning and conducting enrollment projections and studies, admissions and retention studies, institutional cost analyses, student, faculty, administrative and academic program studies, and producing formal written reports. The institutional research office provides such data and information to be used to plan and evaluate the institution's success in accomplishing its' mission. The office also engages in continual study of institutional purpose, policies, procedures, and programs.

The primary purpose of our assessment activities was not to develop and implement an assessment model to satisfy our regional accrediting agency's assessment mandate as expressed in their *Criteria.* It was, instead, to provide general assistance in the development of acceptable assessment strategies and methods that would allow us to gather evidence useful for the improvement of the institutional research function and office.

During 1992 and 1993, West Georgia College was deeply involved in assessment activities, preparing for the review and reaffirmation of our accreditation from the Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Like our sister institutions, we evaluated our institutional mission, purpose and effectiveness, our educational programs, student support services, and administrative processes. In support of these activities, we prepared ourselves to examine our office and function of institutional research. The institutional research office on our campus is unique compared to most other public institutions. The office is housed in the Division of Budget and Research Services, which is primarily responsible for all planning activity, institutional research, sponsored operations, and budget. Although the integration of these units is preeminent to the overall efficiency of the Division, separating these functions in order to assess one of them as an individual entity becomes difficult at best. It is for this purpose that a pragmatic approach to assessment was not only preferred, but imperative.

Our Assessment Model

The assessment of the institutional research function and office should be part of, not apart from, the institution's overall assessment program. It should also be tied to, but separate from, the program planning process. An institutional research office's purpose statement should tie directly to the institution's mission statement. Examination of the unit's purpose statement should result in a planning process identifying how the processes will be carried out and an assessment process that will determine how well the purpose has been carried out.

Institutional research officers **should** be in the business of assessment. They must provide active leadership from within the institution to set the proper tone for assessment activities, be they administrative or academic in nature. Persuasive leadership is vital to the success of any planned change initiative

Just as the structure of the institutional research office and function will differ among institutions, we strived to develop an assessment model that would allow sufficient freedom for any institution to customize its assessment process. Our assessment initiative made careful consideration of sampling issues, times for collecting data and information, use of technology, direct and indirect costs, maintaining the reliability and validity to the data collection techniques, the analysis of assessment results, and the reporting of assessment information. Analysis is the process of aggregating responses to various assessment stimuli and of describing the overall characteristics, patterns, and parts of these data to obtain answers to important questions concerning effectiveness. Interpreting is describing what the analyses mean and their implications. We followed

guidelines (Brinkerhoff, Brethower, Hluchkyj, and Nowakowski, 1983) for the process of data analysis and interpretation: (1) Review the questions being addressed. What does one seek to know from the assessment study? (2) Prepare the basic descriptive analyses, (3) Implement the selected analytical model for the available data, (4) Given the limitations of the model, analyze the basic issues, trends and relationships among the measures of interest, and (5) Noting the limitations of the analyses, interpret the findings.

Erwin (1991) states that the purpose of any model for analyzing assessment information is to document the contribution, or lack thereof, of a particular program. Other related research (Cross and Angelo, 1988; Pascarella, 1987) states that assessment should be more concerned with the effectiveness of programs and experiences, and that the major value of assessment is to improve quality and effectiveness.

When we began our assessment process we were sure of only two things; (1) we needed to assess the institutional research function in compliance with SACS accreditation criteria, and (2) we needed to examine exactly how effective we were in carrying out our office's mission. It was not the why, or the what of assessment that we found to be particular challenging, but the how. The process of institutional assessment is as important as the product. For us, an appropriate program review would require two separate assessments; first an assessment of the Institutional Research Office (an internal program review), and secondly, an evaluation of the institutional research function, as perceived by our constituents across the campus. To facilitate the assessment of the institutional research function, we developed a survey instrument loosely based on Nichols (1989), asking the Executive Council, Deans and Directors, Department Chairs,

as well as other units and individuals who request institutional research data on an ad hoc basis, to evaluate us on seven distinct criteria measures: external reporting; faculty studies; student studies; academic operations; institutional studies; institutional effectiveness; and planning and coordination support.

Respondents were asked to identify their level of need for the stated institutional research criteria and the percentage of that need which was met by the Office of Institutional Research. Although ambitious, the instrument did not yield data that was as reliable as we had initially anticipated. Based on the mission of the Office of Institutional Research, our primary responsibility is to provide information to support the executive decision-making function of the institution. With that in mind, many of the criteria variables included in our instrument did not have meaningful significance for all of the constituent target groups and therefore the groups skewed responses often restricted objective analysis of certain variables. However, the data we collected did indicate that the variables bearing high levels of need for the Executive Council, and the Deans and Directors were being sufficiently and consistently met.

We found that for the most part, the institutional research studies that we prepare on a regular basis are reaching the right people, and providing them with the right information at the right time. Even on items evaluating our contribution to overall institutional effectiveness and planning support, we found that an overwhelming majority of respondents believe that the Office of Institutional Research is effective in supporting the needs of those particular activities.

Another objective of our assessment activity was to conduct an internal program review, addressing several issues in the unit's history and mission, it's contribution to institutional planning, decision-making, and policy formulation functions. We wanted to address issues of organizational structure, including personnel and reporting structure, the institutional research budget, and our decision-making process of determining which projects are approved, how they are prioritized, and who pays for them. Routine and periodic institutional research activities, as well as infrequent requests for data were addressed to determine the patterns of the request source, information generated, and the information's target audience. The final component in our internal program review was to address issues surrounding unit domain of responsibility, resource allocation, equipment needs, and plans and projects to be undertaken in the near future.

To assist the assessment endeavor, we established a set of goals and objectives that would guide our efforts. In our case, the goals also served as the assessment outcomes; having an identifiable record of relevant institutional research assessment activity that would address SACS criteria, and a unit plan for fiscal year 1992-93. To reinforce our two primary goals we established sets of objectives for each goal by determining appropriate assessment criteria (institutional support, administrative leadership, institutional self improvement, financial support, and external relations); the development of a survey instrument to assess the institutional research function; to administer the survey and analyze the results; and to conduct and internal evaluation of the institutional research office.

To facilitate the assessment of the institutional research office, we developed our own model, which consisted of four distinct elements; (1) an examination of the institutional research purpose statement, (2) a description of the major characteristics nd activities of the institutional research office, (3) identification of the components of our assessment model, and finally (4) reporting our assessment findings. In examining our purpose statement, we attempted to answer the questions, "What are the primary purposes of the Institutional Research office and function at our institution?". Furthermore, "How are these related to our administrative division's mission statement, and that of the institution?". Finally, "How is what we've done during the past year relate to each of these purpose statements?"

In describing the major characteristics and activities of the office, we examined the human, physical, and fiscal resources available, the relationship of the Institutional Research office to the institution, and the office's primary responsibilities. In assessing human, physical, and fiscal resources, we looked at staff size, credentials and professional development activities, data processing equipment and support, clerical support services, and funding sources. We addressed issues of resource limitations where warranted. We attempted to stress that information management depends to an extent on the immediate availability and future acquisition of sophisticated software and hardware. In examining the relationship of the Institutional Research office to the institution we briefly discussed the locus of administrative control over the office and the real and perceived major lines of interaction with various institutional research constituents. Specific charges to the institutional research unit were determined by our

placement in the organizational hierarchy. Reporting to the Chief Administrative Officer for Budget and Planning, we are more heavily involved in support of the executive decision making function than support of academic affairs or student services. We assessed the balance between the centralized and decentralized practice of institutional research across the campus community. Lastly we listed all of the major areas of responsibility in the Institutional Research office, both routine and ad hoc, and answered the following questions: (1) What is being done?", (2) Who are we Serving?", and (3) What exactly are they trying to accomplish?", restated we set out to determine if Institutional Research is accomplishing its stated and broader missions. In this section we discussed the intended impact and effectiveness of our activities on certain functional areas of the institution.

The next step involved the establishment and definition of program outcomes and expected results. It was important that the outcomes identified for the program assessment be consistent with the philosophy of the institutional research function and the overall mission of the institution. Each college and university must establish its own assessment program that is sensitive to the unique characteristics and qualities of the institution. Specific outcomes must be written and agreed to by all institutional research constituents. It is important that what is to be assessed, be stated as clearly as possible before any assessment methods is planned or data collected (Erwin, 1991).

The outcomes of the institutional research function are often difficult to define and assess. They are dynamic and require constant review and revision. Institutional researchers should not attempt to 'reinvent the wheel'. They should consult with

professional organizations such as AIR, SCUP, AAHE, as well as other colleagues for already existing examples of outcomes. Improving effectiveness in attaining these outcomes may require manipulation of the campus environment. Often referred to as 'inputs', the campus environment can be described as a set of functions, comprising the programs, services, provisions, resources, and methods whereby purposes and expected outcomes are achieved (Dressel and Associates, 1961). These inputs are the resources of the institution and the characteristics which help offices and units reach prescribed outcomes. The campus environment includes instructional, social, fiscal, organizational, personal, and physical influences (Micek and Arney, 1974).

We realized early on that the purpose of assessment is not to show cause and effect relationships. Thus our assessment focused on outcomes as indicators of the impact and effect of given programs and services as intended by both those responsible for the activity and function.

Most importantly, do not assess only that which is easy to assess; trivial outcomes may impart false meaning. Strive to define outcomes that are central to the program or service under examination. Stress those outcomes that are truly significant. The assessment process can be refined; however, the consequences of defining a program around minimal outcomes might be that standards are lowered over time. The primary purpose for assessment is the improvement of quality of higher education.

Reporting Assessment Findings

It was important that careful consideration be given to how to report the results and conclusions derived from the interpretations of our assessment information. The mode of presentation can be progress reports, a final report, a technical report, a summary, or multimedia presentation. Individual institutions customarily have their own preferred report format, but our assessment report included the following sections:

1. **Unit Purpose Statement.** As included in the annual assessment document because it establishes the foundation upon which the assessment plan was built.

2. **Identify Outcomes and Methods.** This included the core functions, each with at least one outcome, each of which should include at least one outcome statement accompanied by one or more expected result, each with at least one assessment method.

3. **Performing the Assessment.** This section carefully detailed the implementation of assessment methods, the methods and techniques of obtaining data from the chosen assessment method(s), and the compiling of assessment data for analysis and reporting.

4. **Analysis of Results.** This section detailed the utilization of our analysis techniques which provided the best and most thorough insights. We asked such questions as; Were expected outcomes obtained? What are the program and service delivery strengths and weaknesses? We focused on obtained results and how they varied from the expected results. We designed institution-specific strategies to implement improvement to the institutional research function and office. The most relevant comparisons of assessment data were internal and addressed the question "Are we doing better now, than we did before?"

5. **Conclusions/Future Plans for Improvement.** We explained our conclusions and how the data would be used to bring about appropriate change to improve the effectiveness of the institutional research function and office.

6. **Assessment Evaluation.** How well did the assessment program work? What adjustments need to be made in order to improve your assessment methods?

Conclusion

Few assessment endeavors succeed without well conceived planning. Planning emerges in our assessment models and flowcharts, and is instrumental in the development of assessment goals and objectives. The planning function, like institutional research, takes place in every corner of the academic enterprise. Rarely can a conversation take place between two or more administrators without the words "planning" or "assessment" emerging. As we began to develop our assessment plan, it was particularly helpful to keep in mind several of Sturner's planning principles, as they refer to assessment: planning involves deliberately designing actions that will lead to one's goals and objectives; it involves a systems approach, an attempt to understand and a perspective that affects the entire institution; it is dependent on collaboration and wide participation; an organization/unit is not easy to change, nor is it easy to plot or quantify the changes while they are in progress; uncertainty and ambiguity are a way of life; planning is concerned with creating realistic images of the future; and planning is an approach to management, a process by which one learns more about the organization/unit and slowly but continually plans and implement actions to bring about the images desired.

As we learned from the process of assessing our institutional research efforts, the assessment process should be flexible and permit an assorted array of approaches; it should be attuned to current institutional priorities and utilize recent institutional research studies. Assessment should involve only as many individuals as is absolutely necessary (to avoid the 'Group Think' trap). It should have enough breadth and depth to review

accountability and should focus attention on the results of the program assessment. Assessment must use the information and results from the evaluation to improve the program functioning. Lastly, assessment should foster on-going self-study and planning.

The way activities are conducted - the very process- is most important to eventual success or failure. Incorporated in the process is careful attention to composition of the organization/unit, systematic study design, and openness to discussion and comment from the unit's constituencies. It is much better to touch bases than mend fences. However, just as excessive bureaucratic control and secrecy surrounding assessment can diminish credibility and acceptance, unreasonable participation and collaboration can grind assessment to a standstill.

Institutional assessment activities should use objective data where possible and applicable, but yet make no apologies for using subjective data. Objective data is critical, yet considerable variation exists in the availability and quality of such data. The absence of objective data should stimulate those responsible for assessment to develop their own survey instruments and guidelines as bases for decision making. Solid foundations for decision making can be developed by using whatever reliable hard data is available along with experience, judgement, and common sense.

Assessment activities should be action oriented, with strategies for translating recommendations into institutional action. The administration would be remiss to label assessment activities as "filed, forgotten" considering the staff time and dollars invested in the assessment and the importance of keeping the institution abreast or ahead of its problems.

We discovered that our own assessment effort had succumbed to a number of problems that have been prominent in the assessment literature. A past study by the AASCU raised a number of significant cautions with respect to assessment procedures from which our assessment could have benefitted had we been more conscious: avoiding the mass dissemination of assessment findings as they may be distorted and used by other individuals and/or departments for self-serving purposes; avoiding over-stressing individual items apart from the context of the entire evaluation instrument; avoiding assigning the same value to different evaluations - examine the background of each respondent; and to avoid making final recommendations based on evaluation material that only represents a part of the total picture.

It is really too premature to determine the success or failure of our assessment of activity and function of the Office of Institutional Research here at West Georgia College. Only time and experience will determine the outcome of our evaluation and the strategy for actions prompted by our study. We plan to repeat the assessment process during the Fall of 1994. Hopefully, the next evaluation effort will yield a clearer and more concise picture of our office, devoid of the pitfalls uncovered this time around.

In closing, individuals are the ones that drive the organization, it's programs, and assessment and evaluations. The process of developing, implementing, and managing assessment activity is a human problem. The sensitivities and needs of individuals are genuine and must be considered when developing and implementing assessment, but a progressive and dynamic college or university is maintained by accentuating the positive and moving on.

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